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# WHAT HAS BECOME OF HELL?

BY THE REV. GEORGE WOLFE SHINN, D. D.

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This title has been selected, not because of any leaning it may have towards sensationalism, but simply because it states precisely the purpose of this inquiry.

There has been a remarkable change of late years in religious teaching with reference to future punishment. Whereas formerly, in theological papers, in sermons and in books of instruction, much was said about hell, now it is but rarely mentioned. In fact, by many an accredited teacher it is not mentioned at all. It is pertinent to ask, therefore, What has become of hell?

We still use the word "hell" in the Apostles' Creed, but we are always careful to explain that there it does not mean the place of punishment, but simply the place of departed spirits; that it has no reference to their condition as happy or unhappy, but simply refers to the separation of soul and body, and to the residence of the soul in an intermediate state or place until the resurrection day. We are not concerned with that use of the word in this inquiry. We have started out to find what has become of hell as a place of punishment. We hear very little about it except in the profanity of the day. We do not hear of it in the pulpit, nor see any reference to it in the religious press, nor in the modern theological book, nor is it often brought up in religious conversation. It is tabooed by the pulpit generally. When, under stress, the preacher has to refer to it, he may adopt the euphemistic method of one who spoke of "the place which could not be named in the presence of cultured people."

It was not always thus, as we may learn by taking up almost any book of sermons delivered fifty years ago, or by reading the diaries kept by people who lived in the days of our grand-parents, or by perusing the history of religious controversies. In a day

not very long past men argued with each other concerning the place and concerning the people who were on their way thither. Some of us are not too old to remember the terrible appeals made by the revivalists to flee from the wrath to come, and so to escape the pains of hell. The stories which have been handed down to us concerning the great revival movements in this country show that the prominent theme, which was repeated again and again in every possible way, was how to escape from hell.

We know, for example, that so superb a thinker as Jonathan Edwards, the author of "The Freedom of the Will," was also a revivalist of the most intense type, and that he had such power in portraying the dangers of the impenitent that men screamed out during his sermons.

If we go back further, we find that religious literature is full of allusions to hell. We need hardly refer to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and to Dante's *Divina Comedia*. The theology of the Middle Ages was so full of it that men have sometimes thought hell was a creation of that period.

Still further back, in patristic literature, we find it in large profusion. St. Polycarp said to the pro-consul, "With fire which burns for an hour or so and is extinguished, thou dost threaten me; but dost thou not know of the fire of the future judgment and of the eternal punishment reserved for the ungodly?" St. Augustine took pains to refute the opinions of those who thought that the torments of hell would only be purgatorial, and therefore only of limited duration. St. Chrysostom described the miseries of the future of the lost. With the exception of Origen and a few of his followers, there was an outspoken belief in hell by all the Fathers.

When we turn to the Sacred Scriptures, we certainly discover the recognition of hell in those writings. Unhappily, in our English Bible the word "hell" is made the equivalent of four other words—Sheol, Gehenna, Tartarus and Hades. It is going over ground very familiar to many to say that "Sheol," the Hebrew word in the Old Testament, usually refers, in an indefinite way, to the grave or the place or condition of the dead. "Hades," the Greek word in the New Testament, has a similar meaning, with perhaps a clearer recognition of continuing life under new conditions. It is the word "Gehenna," also translated hell, upon which so much depends. The name "Gehenna" was taken from

the Hebrew word by which the valley of Hinnom was known. That was the valley near Jerusalem where the great sanitary fires, kept up day and night, consumed the refuse of the city and the bodies of unclean beasts, and sometimes the bodies of criminals. From being the name of a locality near the city, the word was adopted to refer to that place or condition in the unseen world where punishment would be meted out to the impenitent. And so we find the word used in such passages as St. Matthew v., 22, "shall be in danger of the Gehenna of fire;" St. Matthew v., 29, "and not that thy whole body shall be cast into Gehenna;" St. Mark ix., 43, "into Gehenna, into the fire that shall never be quenched;" St. Matthew x., 28, "Fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna."

We are not seeking for explanations now, nor are we considering the nature of future punishment nor the character of those who are to be punished hereafter. We are simply trying to establish the fact that there is an unbroken chain of testimony to the belief in the existence of hell down to a comparatively recent time. That fact is surely well established. As a fact it cannot be contradicted. Even Origen, under whose arms every heretic seeks refuge now, believed in hell. But he thought it was not to be eternal. He looked for a final restoration. Origen is never to be cited as denying future retribution, but as only disbelieving in the eternity of torment.

The belief in hell as a place or condition of punishment, with varying explanations as to the nature and continuance of that punishment, has been the belief of Christian people from the beginning of Christianity to our own day.

Now, almost suddenly, certainly with remarkable unanimity, men have well nigh ceased to talk about it. Whereas they once said much about it, now they say but little; some, indeed, nothing at all. It has ceased to be urged as a motive for good living in this life, and men are not told to prepare themselves here to avoid it there in the future. In other words, there has been, if not an actual denial of hell, a very thorough change of emphasis.

What has become of hell? Here is surely a very notable change in theology at the close of the nineteenth century. How did it come about? It is claimed by some friends of the late Henry Ward Beecher that he did more than any other man in this country to change the style of thinking of many preachers

and of many laymen who admired him. If he did not begin the change, he certainly helped on the revulsion from the old doctrines which had been preached, and he dealt some very effective blows at the narrow theology which had been accepted by many as orthodoxy.

The movement, however, for the dissolution of hell began much earlier in this country. The Universalist body came into existence here as early as 1770, as the antagonists of the intense views which were held by the old Calvinists. Universalism has gradually pervaded the country, and has done much to tincture the thought of the religious world. Crude and ignorant as were many of the efforts of the first Universalists, they directed their blows at one point, and they made their impression.

Perhaps, however, nothing has had so widespread an influence in this direction over intelligent minds in America as Canon Farrar's book on "Eternal Hope." It found a sympathetic audience prepared for it in different parts of the land, and in different grades of society, and the views expressed in it were very readily adopted. It was in vain that replies were made, and that Dr. Pusey issued his book entitled, "What Is of Faith?" Evidently, many in the religious world wanted to get rid of hell.

A very curious compromise was attempted by some who could not quite accept Farrar and retain their old orthodoxy. The compromise is in the suggestion of a second probation. That is, if one has not had a fair and full chance to know the truth here, he will have a second chance in the other world.

Believers in a second probation retained their belief in a place of punishment. One antagonist of this view of a probation after death says that to him it seems to be groping for "a new probation, not for the culprit but for the Judge, as if they were apprehensive that, according to their scheme, He would not do the exactly right and infinitely kind and merciful thing the first time." They would give Him a chance to do better later on.

Now, although this is a "smart" way of replying to views of another side, it does not by any means sweep away the foundations on which some build up a belief that the future (before the final judgment) brings not only a growth in goodness for some, but a growth towards goodness for others.

It is very curious how Purgatory, formerly condemned as one of the errors of Romanism, is now adopted in other forms by the

ultra Protestant. Substitute such an expression as "The soul will be trained by the bitterness of experience, past and present, warned by judgments yet to be fulfilled, in clearer light beholding things in better perspective"—substitute this sentence for "Purgatory," and do you not have the same thing? Purgatory may carry with it gross materialistic conceptions of purifying fires, but the essential thought is the same as that contained in the expressed hope that somehow, when men in another world see what sin is, and how it harms them and dishonors God, they will want to have it purged and done away, and so will welcome the purifying pains. But even if we adopt this view of reparation in a future life, we do not get rid of retribution. Nor do we by such a view necessarily get rid of eternal punishment. May there not be some incorrigible ones left over after the last chance of reparation is offered? And if there are any, then we are back again to the old thought of an eternal rebellion, and hence an eternal penalty.

The usual plan, however, for obliterating hell has been to explain away the language in which the doctrine of eternal suffering is supposed to be set forth. There can be no doubt that figurative language is used. It has been simply impossible to set forth the truths of religion without the use of figurative language. Happiness is described under the figure of living in a beautiful city, the City of God. The opposite of the happiness of heaven is the misery of hell. To express this, fire is used as the dominant figure. Fire is a symbol of painfulness, hence of punishment. Then, to render fire more horrible, another destructive agent is added—the suffocating fumes of brimstone; and, to express the acme of punishment, we have the figure of fire and brimstone, and we are told of the lake of fire and brimstone where the smoke of torment continually ascends. When such expressions are used, are we dealing with material facts? Is there a city whose streets are paved with gold and whose gates are of pearl? Is there a lake whose waves are liquid fire? The language is figurative. If figurative in one case, it is figurative in both.

But the figurative language of Scripture has been added to by the efforts of men who have tried to deter their fellow-men from vice by elaborating the horrors of hell. So we have been told of red-hot gridirons, attended by shrieking demons who have kept the gridirons well filled with broiling victims. We have heard of huge cauldrons full of boiling lead and brimstone, to be poured

over new comers as the ceremony of welcoming them to the society of the lost. We have heard of a pestilential atmosphere laden with concentrated diseases, and men driven by demons to breathe this disease-laden air. We have heard of horned and cloven-footed demons, goading their victims around circles, up and down steep heights, onward and onward, simply for the gratification of their hatred and to add to the sorrows of the lost. We have been told of the great chorus of dreadful shrieks that issued from prisons into which special victims have been driven for special enormities.

What ingenuity men have used to describe the life lived by men in hell! As an illustration of how the materialistic views of hell were kept before the people some centuries ago, think of that strange fresco in an old parish church in England. It is a sample of many like adornments which were once common. Over the chancel arch, where it is continually in sight, is a picture representing the doom of the lost. Some very agile demons with pitchforks are shoving poor wretches, men and women, down the throat of an awful monster. The doomed victims do not seem to like it, but the monster does. His appetite is insatiable and he has room for them all in his capacious maw. A nice thing to look at every Sunday! Weather stains mercifully obliterated the worst of it after a while and would have got rid of it all, but along came the restorer, the ecclesiologist, and he brought it back in all its hideousness.

Figurative language has been taken literally, translated into the grossest materialism, and then added to until its very extravagance suggested revolt. But when the revolt came, those who would get rid of the materialistic views of hell have so completely explained away all the figurative language in which reference is made to hell in the Scriptures that nothing is left. Or, to state it in other words, because they objected to the views held, they have tried to deny the reality back of even the figurative terms in which that reality was set forth.

Another effort has been made to relieve some of the awfulness associated with the idea of hell by making explanations of the words "eternal," "everlasting," and whatever seems to imply the *changeless* condition of the sufferings of the lost. One of the most ingenious is that which requires us to observe that "eternal" is not *always the attribute but the result*. Thus "eternal redemption"

means a redemption eternal in its results. The act of redemption was accomplished on the Cross in a day; the results are eternal. Sodom and Gomorrah are spoken of as the prey of eternal fire, yet the fire does not continue. It is the result of the fire which is spoken of.

Again, much is said of eternity as relating to this age, this aeon, and it has the idea of completing a circle; but there may be, according to some who hold this view, other circles beyond. This is an aeon, and eternity has reference to this period over which the gleam of revelation is thrown. There may be aeons and eternities and eternities beyond.

Then the philosophers come along and tell us that we know nothing at all of time when we get beyond the present material facts. Time is the succession of events. When we get out of the region of material things there is no time. And here comes that old monastic story to illustrate what the philosophers mean. The monk, delighted with the singing of the birds one summer morning, roused himself upon thinking he had lost a few moments in an unaccustomed enjoyment, and discovered that he had been listening a thousand years. And so the philosopher says that such expressions as "everlasting," "eternal," are to be regarded as the blue haze which ends our view as we look over the horizon. Everything shades off into this vaporous nothing and ends there; that is, so far as we know. We are carried thus far, and then we are told that that is the end of time.

One of the most ingenious and earnest efforts in the way of explanation of what is involved in the doctrine of hell is called "conditional immortality." The leading idea is that all men are capable of survival in their spiritual nature, but that not all will survive eternally. Some may cease to be, after the death of the body; others may live after death and be punished for a while, but they are finally resolved into nothingness. Men who do not possess the sanctifying, renewing, immortal Spirit must perish, either at death or some time after death. According to this view, immortality is a special gift to those who are united to Christ by faith. All those souls not brought into union with Him lose their power, and eventually lose all conscious individuality. That is, they cease to be.

The doctrine of conditional immortality makes it necessary to deny the natural immortality of the human soul. This is a most



important point; for, if the soul may cease to be, then eternal death means a dissolution which continues eternally. It is boldly declared by those who hold this view that the Scriptures speak nowhere of immortality apart from Christ; that there is no permanent life except for the believer.

There are many things connected with this doctrine of conditional immortality which would make almost any one wish he could accept it.

These various theories—denials, explanations and the like—indicate a most unsettled condition of Christian eschatology at the close of this nineteenth century. There is no agreement among Christian people on these points; but, on the contrary, there is great divergence of view, as is very evident in sermons and newspapers, in trials for heresy and in the discussions of ordinary people. It is most seen in the uncertain sounds which proceed from the pulpit, and in the almost entire cessation of the appeal to fear. Appeals to fear now! How seldom are men warned of the judgment to come! Hell has lost its terrors. What has become of hell?

The appeals to fear have well nigh ceased, and yet there is no fact which we are so compelled to see as the fact of retribution. The law of retribution works in our present life. We become aware of it in our earliest infancy, and we never become developed in character until we have learned to fear that which is evil and to shun the consequences of sin. There is a sense of righteousness in all men, and all men know that unrighteousness brings punishment. It is fair to assume that what holds good in the present life, that what is a part of man's very structure here, will continue hereafter. We may give up entirely the notion of a material hell, but we cannot give up the doctrine of retribution. Suffering must follow sin, and therefore to appeal to fear is not only legitimate, but it is in accordance with the structure of man's nature. Let us grant that the descriptions of hell are figurative. Let us admit that men have blundered in accepting as literal what was intended to be figurative. Let us grant that there is no material lake of torment. Yet, after all, is there not something back of the imagery? Is there not something real—so real that men may well strive to escape it? Can it be well with him who passes hence in his sins?

If we are asked for reasons for believing in future retribution,

we need not dwell upon the thought of Divine sovereignty showing its detestation of sin by punishment. That view has been brought out with frightful distinctness in Puritan theology. Rather let us call attention to the fact which forces itself upon the notice of even the least thinking of men. It is this: *Men are condemned by themselves.* They must recognize at some period that they prepared themselves for their own place and for their own condition. A rather grotesque illustration of this point is suggested by a once popular preacher. It is the story of a man who got into the wrong boat. He was a prize fighter, and, rushing in a hurry to embark on an excursion boat, got into one filled with a company of enthusiastic Methodist people bound for a camp meeting. When the boat started he found out his mistake, and offered the captain all the money he had if he would land him somewhere. He was out of place. His character did not accord with that around him. He was a most unhappy man.

Feeble as the illustration is, it suggests that each man is making his own future along the lines of his own character. Now if this be so, it is perfectly legitimate to appeal to fear. There is, however, such a tone of uncertainty about this matter of retribution that people almost gain the impression that religious teachers are trifling with them. The dread of speaking out boldly causes many a sermon to lose its point. The preacher seems afraid to say what he believes, or appears to be in great doubt whether, after all, it makes any difference how people live. Some lay people have great reluctance to hearing anything about hell or retribution of any kind. It is a distasteful topic. Awhile ago a clergyman was requested to resign his parish because of a difference between his vestrymen and himself upon this subject. He warned his hearers in some sermons that unrepented sin must be punished in another world. His vestrymen informed him that they did not believe in hell any longer, and they seemed to think they had abolished it by ceasing to believe in it. But, however distasteful it is to men, as there is such a thing as retribution it must be set forth. There is no need of falling into the error of those who delighted in describing the doom of the lost; nor into the error of others who mistake what is figurative for what is literal. There is no need of allowing the imagination to run riot over the mysteries of the future. In a straightforward fashion, they who believe in retribution must declare the difference between the righteous and the wicked.

The pulpit is losing some of its power because it so seldom appeals to healthy fear. It has been taken for granted that men could always be reached by appeals to their better nature. The fact has been overlooked that the better nature is often hidden from sight by the encrustation of worldliness and sin. The consciences of men must be aroused, and the most effectual quickening of conscience is through the dread of the judgment to come.

It is not for any of us to explain the thousand difficulties that spring up just as soon as we think of the separation of men by character in the world now unseen. It is not well to discuss them in the pulpit, for we have so little to help us in the formation of opinions. The contention is that, as there is future retribution, so men must be warned against it now, and that an appeal must be made again and again to the motive of fear.

It is this failure to appeal to fear which accounts in part for the decline of interest in personal religion by so many. It is the seeming willingness of so many Christian people to give up all reference to retribution that is making it difficult for some to know what course to pursue. We may talk as we will about the evanescent nature of fear, and we may talk about its being an inferior motive, but in all other things in life it is appealed to. Take it out of life, and chaos comes in ordinary matters. Because it has been taken out of religion—out of the religion of our time—there has been the weakening of the force of religion. If we had perfectly normal beings to deal with—and that is a modern way of saying, if we were all without sin—then might there be no reference to fear, but an appeal to everything high and holy within us. We have to do with beings who are sinful and who must be led up to the higher motives by the exercise of the lower.

What, then, has become of hell? It has not been obliterated. It cannot be obliterated. Retribution exists as an awful fact back of all figurative language. Men in our day have overlooked retribution in seeking to get rid of materialistic notions concerning hell. The time has come to recall the awful fact of retribution. But it must be done discreetly, and always with those exceptions in mind which so greatly modify it. There are allowances to be made when we consider the working out of retribution as it pertains to the future. First of all, it cannot include children in its penalty, inasmuch as not inherited sin but wilful sin is punished, and children are irresponsible. And here we read one of the

reasons why there has been such revolt against the doctrine of retribution. It has been taught that men are to be condemned for original sin. One of the thirty-nine articles of the Anglican and American Churches has a clause which has often been misunderstood in favor of such teaching. "It deserveth God's wrath and damnation." What? Not the being who has come into this inheritance of sin, but original sin itself. Certainly, God hates sin. But there came One in our nature who was without sin. He came to be the Lamb without spot, who, by the sacrifice of Himself once made, should take away the sins of the world.

Here, then, on one hand, is a universal fact, the infection of sin in every human being; and sin deserves God's wrath and damnation. On the other hand, is another fact as universal, that Christ has tasted death for every man; that He died that He might pay the penalty for every man. Does not one fact overbalance the other? If so, there can be no wrath or damnation now for the infection of our nature. Punishable sin is the conscious violation of law.

Then, in the next place, in thinking of future retribution we must always think of the large number of people who are as irresponsible as the veriest infants. They may have intelligence enough for the purposes of daily life, but no more. The religious nature, existing somewhere in every human being, finds but imperfect modes of manifestation, or is altogether hidden. We are not speaking of idiots or of the insane, but of many people who, while belonging to neither of these classes, are no more responsible than children are. We cannot think of their being consigned to penalty in the other world.

Then, as we think of future retribution, we come to the great bulk of those who have never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel—the vast multitude of the heathen. Are they all condemned for the infection of their nature, if Christ died for them? Are they all condemned for rejecting a Gospel of which they have never heard? What of the heathen, then, in the life to come? We can know very little about their future condition, except that they will be judged righteously according to a standard which they themselves must admit to be just.

Part of the perplexity with reference to the heathen arises from two errors—first, thinking of them as all equally condemned to perdition, and then thinking of eternal happiness as alike for

all the saved. Since the sacrifice of Christ, the heathen stand as all other men. They come within the merits of that sacrifice, although they are unconscious of the fact. If they are condemned, it will not be because of original sin, but because they have not lived up to their own laws.

When a correct view is taken of responsibility—responsibility according to knowledge—it relieves the doctrine of retribution considerably, inasmuch as it narrows down the number of the lost to those who consciously and wilfully reject the offer of salvation.

When, besides all this, we take a correct view of future bliss and of future woe, we find still more relief. It cannot be that all the redeemed in the future will be equally happy, and that all the lost will be equally wretched; for there are varying degrees of capacity. There must be an immeasurable distance, for example, between the saintly martyr, whose whole life was a conflict and whose death came as a happy release—an immeasurable distance between his experiences in the eternal kingdom and those of a little child, whose coming into life and whose departure hence were on the same day. There must be infinite grades of happiness there, as there must be vast differences between those who are driven into outer darkness.

And what of those who are driven from the presence of the Lord? What are their experiences? How long does their expulsion last? Is it forever and forever? Or is there some limit? If they learn obedience through their sufferings, will their sufferings end? And is there in some far-off future some final restoration, so that the last vestige of rebellion shall be removed?

What answers shall be given to these questions? No man can answer them, except to express the hope that somehow the justice of God may be satisfied, and the sinner's rebellion cease. But we know nothing clearly upon these points. We do know that there is retribution for sin—for sin unrepented of and unforgiven. Whether that retribution continue for one year, or for a thousand years, or for eternity, it is not material to decide. He who dies in sin passes on to be judged for the deeds done in the body. Having rejected the offers of mercy here, he must meet penalty there. The man who dies impenitent and unforgiven finds his retribution.

Judgment, like the gift of life, is immediate. It is not to be looked for only in the future. It is now. Future judgment is

no arbitrary act. It is not something which springs from laws to be set in motion hereafter. It is the working out of laws under which we are now living. If we sin wilfully now, we must suffer for it. If we pass hence with a load of unrepented and unforgiven sin, judgment must surely follow us wherever we go. But it is not a new judgment; only a continuation of a judgment begun here; something inseparable from sin. Why should we fear to speak of a judgment to come when we know that a judgment has already come? True, the present judgment is not in every instance that which brings bitter anguish, but it is just as real as if men groaned in agony. It is a separation from goodness; a loss of spiritual power; a falling below the ideal. When men's eyes are opened, they may see that the loss of what they might have been, and their degradation through sin, is indeed the visitation of penalty. Judgment consists quite largely in deprivation. Such a judgment has begun here, and it points to the awful issues of the future, when the day of earthly probation shall have ended.

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